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PARTHIAN MESOPOTAMIA

Vito Messina*

The culture of Parthian Mesopotamia is the result of mutual contributions and interrelations originated long before the beginnings of the Parthian period, which traditionally spans from the conquest of Mithradates I, in 140-141 BC, to the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, in AD 224. Even the region denoted by the term Mesopotamia – the homeland of Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations –, which is overlapped for its largest part by nowadays Iraq and conventionally extends along the course of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, must be considered in a wider geographical and historical context, particularly when referring to the period following the adventure of Alexander, for it reveals to have had cultural and commercial connections with all the regions of Hellenized Asia.

Literary and material evidence is not extensive and there are many blanks in the reconstruction of complex cultural events – a reconstruction that, in the lack of other sources or new data, is often limited to art history –, but it is clear that in any attempt at a definition of the culture and art of Mesopotamia in the Parthian period there are two capital arguments that cannot be neglected: (a) the tenacity of the ancient Mesopotamian culture, filtrated through the Achaemenid tradition, and (b) the way this culture evolved after its direct and astonishing encounter with the Greek culture and art at the end of the 4th century BC.

The dialogue induced by this event originated a process of cultural interaction and led to the creation of a common language that characterized the artistic production for centuries, but the ancient Mesopotamian tradition can be considered as the basis of the complex culture of the region at least until the turn of the common era. Literary and archaeological evidence indicates that this tradition revived after Alexander with the full support of the Seleucid sovereigns – the heirs of the Macedonian conqueror who presented themselves as kings of Babylon (*Šarru Babilī*), as well as Basileis, and displayed a propitious attitude to local customs –,¹ but its persistence seems attested well after the Parthian conquest.

Extensive layers of occupation, dating to the Hellenistic and Parthian periods, show that ancient Mesopotamian cities such as Babylon, Uruk, Assur and Borsippa continued to exist as important religious and administrative centres, while ruins of large buildings in the same sites indicate that traditional sanctuaries, built or restored under the direct patronage of the Seleucids, were still in use during the entire Parthian period.²

At Uruk, the main centre of South Mesopotamia, at least two monumental sanctuaries were built by local governors, with the support of Antiochus III, following the traditional Babylonian layout: the Bit Resh, including the temple dedicated to Anu and Antum, which was erected close to the ziqqurat already dedicated to Anu in the second half of the 4th millennium BC and restored by the Seleucids, revealing a clear link with the traditional local cult; the Irigal, only partially unearthed, which was dedicated, according to cuneiform sources, to Ishtar and Nanna, maybe with the purpose of replacing the ancient E-anna sanctuary. In the layout of the Bit Resh, which is far better preserved, no Hellenistic influences are clearly detectable: this is characterized by wide courtyards surrounded by several rooms made in mudbricks, which had different functions, and, in its centre, by the cellae of Anu and Antum, built in baked bricks. Its façades were even articulated in niches, as they were in all other Mesopotamian temples, and decorated with glazed bricks representing traditional animal or monsters (fig. 1).³

Official worship in the Esagila seems attested by few epigraphs down to the beginnings of the Sasanian period,⁴ while a Greek inscription of the beginnings

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1 MESSINA 2004 *Continuità*, 169-172, and selected bibliography.

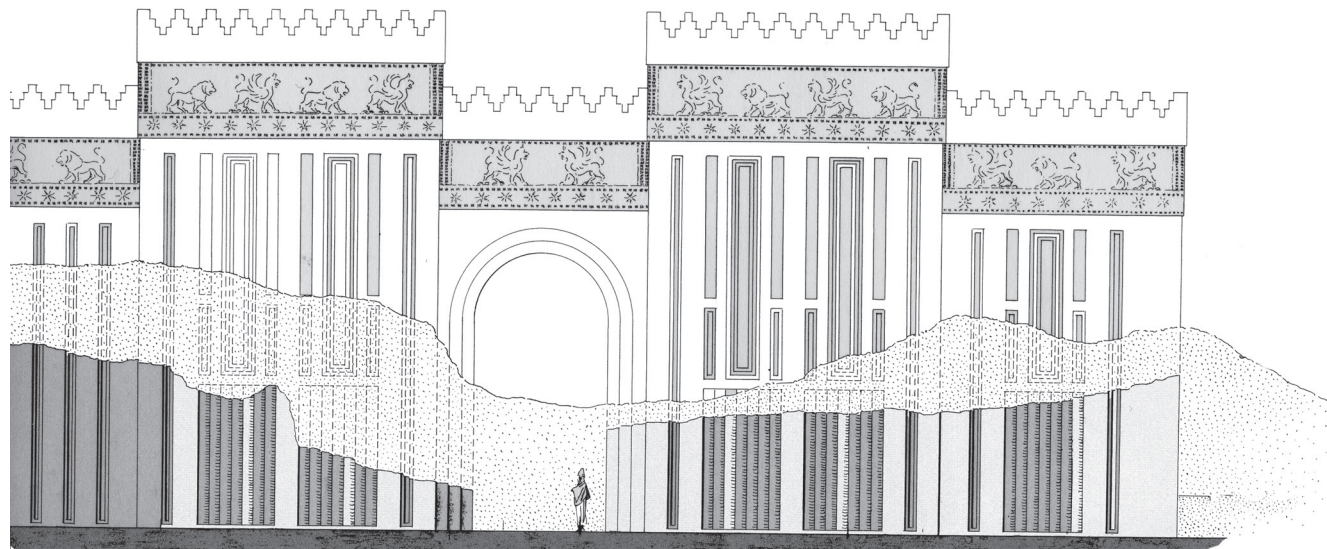
2 DOWNEY 1988 *Religious architecture*, 137-173.

3 See the restored façade and decoration in KOSE 1998 *Architektur*, encl. 59.

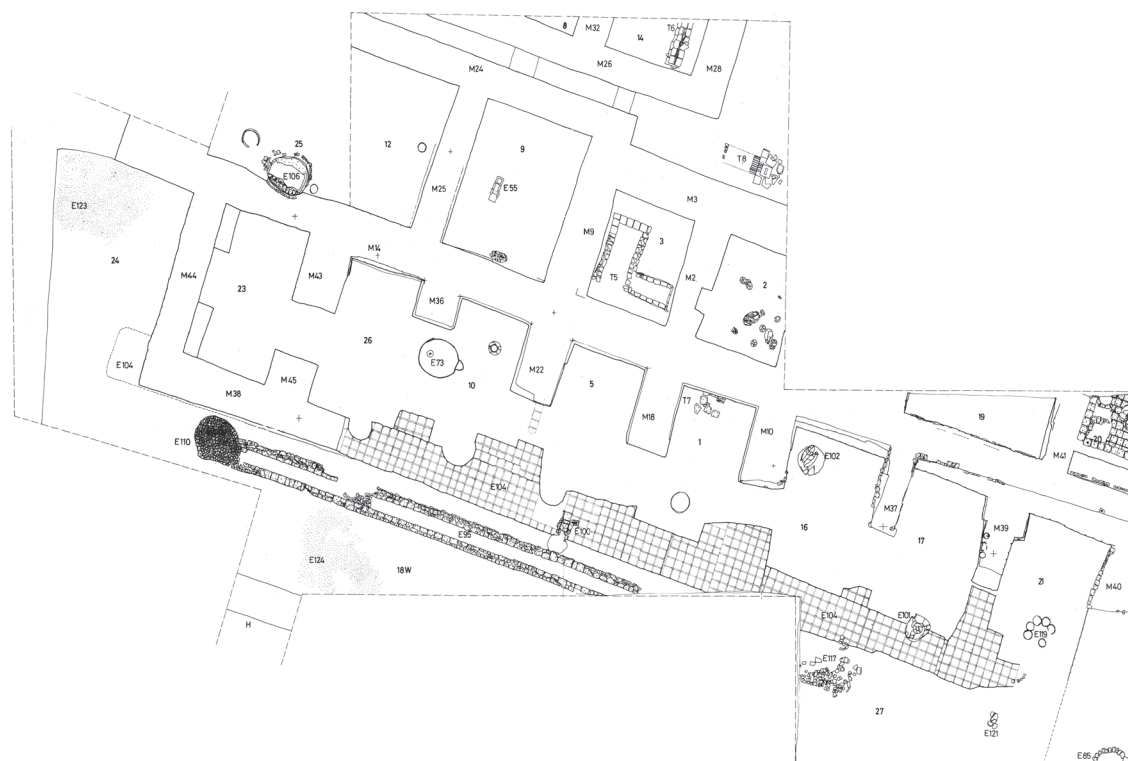
4 JOANNES 2004 *Mesopotamia*, 253-254.

1. Uruk, Bit Resh. Restored façade and decoration (after Kose 1998 *Architektur*, encl. 59).

2. Seleucia on the Tigris, stoa (after VALTZ 1990 *Archives Square*, pl. III).



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of the 4th century AD proves the continuation of a Babylonian cult practice in Borsippa.⁵

These buildings were certainly the seats of active traditional institutions, for the survival of cuneiform script must be dependant upon the existence of scribal schools within the circle of local priests: this is well attested not only by cuneiform sources, but also by the archaeological findings, such those of Uruk, where two important archives of cuneiform tablets, concerning for their largest part prebends and private transactions, were situated into rooms of the Bit Resh and Irigal, and kept under the care of at least one well known family of priests, that of Anu-Belshunu.⁶

According to some scholars, the documents available became much more rare and almost exclusively of an astronomical nature after the middle of the 1st century BC, and disappeared during the 1st century AD,⁷ a date however postponed by other scholars to the 2nd or even 3rd century AD, on the evidence of the so-called Graeco-Babyloniaca tablets.⁸

Public buildings, temples and houses continued to be built in mudbricks, as they were for millennia, even in the case of buildings revealing a clear Greek influence, such as the stoa of Seleucia on the Tigris (fig. 2);⁹ the unchanged production of commonware and the local custom of burying the dead under the floor of the houses (pl. 17.1),¹⁰ attested in some centres down to the Parthian period,¹¹ denote the affection of a large part of the inhabitants for their Mesopotamian roots; and local influence in handicrafts is also revealed by the production of terracotta figurines.

It is doubtful whether the Parthian sovereigns displayed the same propitious attitude of the Seleucids to local customs, but some evidence seem to show that the Parthian elites agreed to the culture of the Seleucid court while

ascending to power: this culture was the synthesis of different components – in particular, of the Mesopotamian culture of the local elites and of the Iranian culture of one branch of the Seleucid dynasty –, but remained basically Hellenistic.

Soon after the middle of the 2nd century BC, Mithradates I conquered Mesopotamia and relegated the last Seleucids in Syria. He was the leader of a dynasty native of the Central Asian steppes and founded in the mid 3rd century BC: the Arsacids.

After their accession, purposing to legitimate themselves as the new rulers of Asia, these sovereigns embraced, together with their court, the Hellenistic culture that was by that time the common language of the countries they had subjected, although they never disclaimed their nomadic roots and their basically Iranian culture. Whether this choice was made at their convenience or not, the extraordinary finds of Old Nisa – the abode of the dynasty – show that the retinue of the early Arsacid sovereigns actually assimilated the habits of a Hellenistic court, at least in their attitude: the outstanding corpus of ivory rhytons, which in their different styles show at least two groups of a remarkable Hellenistic tradition,¹² the small silver figurines representing Greek deities,¹³ and the almost life-size clay sculptures portraying the ancestors of the dynasty in a clear Greek appearance¹⁴ could be read in this context.

Following the Seleucid propaganda Mithradates I ascended the throne as the real founder of the Parthian empire, being portrayed on coins struck in Mesopotamia in right profile with the diadem tied at his nape;¹⁵ and by doing so he also established a model for the Arsacid royal iconography that was followed by several of his successors.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ According to some scholars (LINDSTRÖM 2003 *Uruk*, 71–72), the biggest archive was housed into the room 79b of the Bit Resh, together with clay bullae that sealed folded parchments. See *Ibid.*, n. 424, for selected bibliography, and VAN DIJK 1962 *Inscripfen-funde*, with particular regard to the Anu Belshunu family.

⁷ JOANNES 2004 *Mesopotamia*, 226–254.

⁸ GELLER 1997 *Wedge*, 44–46.

⁹ This was a great building bounding the eastern side of the main agora of Seleucia on the Tigris – the northern agora – and facing the public archives: it was composed by a rows of more than 8 rectangular rooms with a paved front on the square (VALTZ 1990 *Archives Square*, pl. III).

¹⁰ MESSINA 2006 *Archivi*, 144–150.

¹¹ In centres like Uruk, Babylon, Nippur and Assur burials of the Seleucid and Parthian periods were located in specific areas within the city walls and inside buildings that were partially in use, while at Seleucia on the Tigris these were located under the floors of inhabited houses of the Parthian period, both in the Block G6 and in the area of the archives building (MESSINA 2006 *Archivi*, 144–145, and selected bibliography).

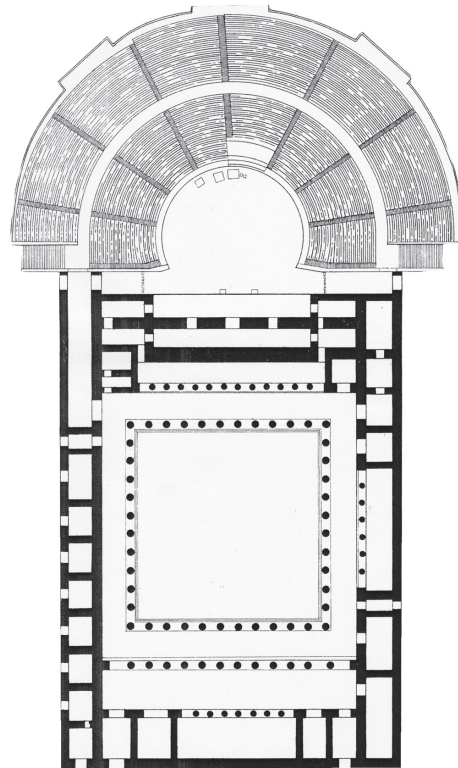
¹² Among the carved friezes decorating the 48 rhytons found in the so-called 'Square House' of Old Nisa different groups can be distinguished by their style: starting from the genuine Hellenistic production of some carvings, which can be considered as the most ancient examples of the corpus, some works seem to evolve toward a less naturalistic representation of the figures. A recent study on the ivory rhytons found at Old Nisa has been published by PAPPALARDO 2010 *Rhyta*. With regard to the Hellenistic influence on the rhytons of Old Nisa, see INVERNIZZI 1994 *Grundlagen*.

¹³ Figurines of Athena Parthenos and Eros harvesting, made in gilded silver, have been found in the so-called 'Square House' (INVERNIZZI 1999 *Sculture di metallo*, 11–48).

¹⁴ Fragments of clay statues have been discovered in different points of Old Nisa, particularly in the so-called 'Square Hall' and 'Round Hall'. The best preserved fragments show male bearded heads with diadem or pseudo-attic helmet (PIIIPKO 1991 *Testa*; PIIIPKO 1991 *Head*): one of these heads has been interpreted as the posthumous portrait of Mithradates I, represented in the manner of a philosopher (INVERNIZZI 2001 *Dynastic art*).

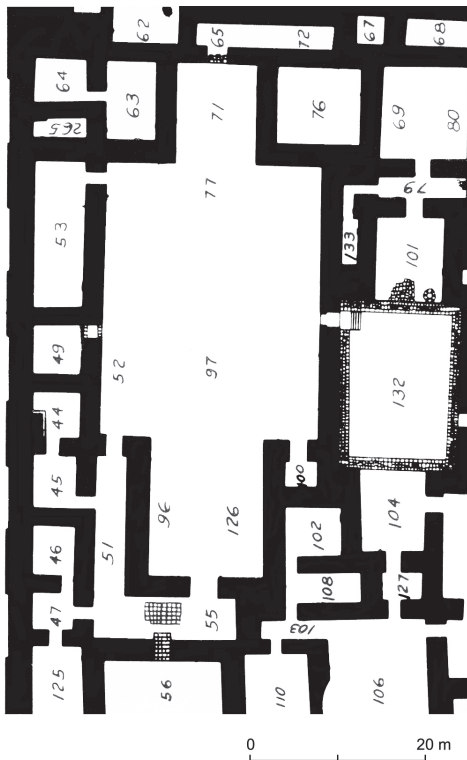
¹⁵ Remarkable coins of Mithradates I, preserved in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale (Cabinet des médailles), are published by LE RIDER 1965 *Suse*, pl. LXX:16–20.

3. Babylon, plan of the Greek theatre (after WETZEL, SCHMIDT & MALLWITZ 1957 *Babylon*, pl. 11a).



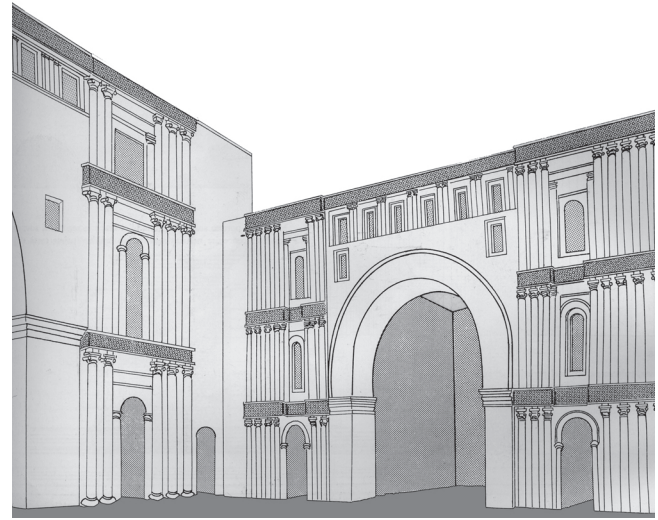
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4. Seleucia on the Tigris, plan of the iwan-house in the Block G6 (after HOPKINS 1972 *Topography*, pl. IX).



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5. Assur, Parthian palace. Four court iwans façades (after ANDRAE & LENZEN 1933 *Assur*, fig. 15).



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In this context, also the architecture maintained traditional forms, however revealing a clear Hellenistic influence particularly in its decoration. Our knowledge is limited to a few occurrences and public buildings remain almost unknown, especially because Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital in Mesopotamia, has not been located on the ground.¹⁶

Two important exceptions are the purely Greek theatre of Babylon, which was restored to remain in use until the 2nd century AD (fig. 3),¹⁷ and the theatre of Seleucia on the Tigris, which was built under the Seleucids on mud-brick substructures, following traditional Mesopotamian techniques, and restored during the 2nd century AD.¹⁸ Religious and residential architecture clearly show the tenacity of local traditions both in the building techniques and layouts. While the great sanctuaries remained

16 A recent study, focusing on the literary evidence regarding the topography and settlement history of the al-Madā'in area – where Ctesiphon must have been located together with Seleucia on the Tigris and Veh-Ardashir (Coche) – suggests that the most probable location of the Mesopotamian Parthian capital must have been Northwards of Veh-Ardashir, on the opposite bank of the ancient course of the river Tigris (NEGRO PONZI 2005 *Al-Madā'in*).

17 WETZEL, SCHMIDT & MALLWITZ 1957 *Babylon*, 3-22, pl. 3-11.

18 A. Invernizzi, the director of the excavation in the northern agora of Seleucia on the Tigris, is the first scholar who proposed the localization of the city theatre at tell 'Umar (INVERNIZZI 1994 *Hellenism*, 9-12). The final report of the Italian excavation (MESSINA 2010 *Tell 'Umar*, chap. 3) suggests that this was a huge building with three main phases: a first monumental phase, dated to the full Seleucid period, is characterized by a massive mudbrick core, supporting the summa cavea of a Greek theatre, and by baked brick reinforcement and façade decorations; a later phase of the full Parthian period can be interpreted as the restoration of a portion of the summa cavea, which collapsed in antiquity; the most recent phase, dated to the end of the Sasanian period, shows a huge watchtower with a massive wall, which englobed the ruins of the theatre. It is noteworthy that a temple with a traditional Mesopotamian layout was built in connection with the theatre, as it leaned against its western façade.

3. Seleucia on the Tigris, seal impression with the figure of Dionysos. Baghdad, Iraq Museum.

almost untouched, a small temple such the Gareus temple at Uruk is a good example of this mixture: its plan is of Babylonian type, with a wide cella and cult niche in the rear wall, while the outer walls are decorated with engaged columns with ionic bases that reveal a Hellenistic influence.¹⁹

At Seleucia on the Tigris, the capital of Seleucid Mesopotamia that maintained its cultural importance in the Parthian period,²⁰ and in the Merkes, a dwelling quarter of Babylon, the private houses are of local type, with an irregular plan and a central courtyard, at least until the end of the 1st century BC.²¹

The continuous Hellenistic influence in the architectural decoration lasted during the entire Parthian period also when an Iranian distinctive architectural form, the iwan, was developed apparently during the 1st century BC and widely spread by the 1st century AD: this is a large, vaulted room, open on one side to a courtyard, that could be used both in religious and residential buildings. A dwelling block of Seleucia on the Tigris, the so-called 'Block G6', gives a good idea of the latter use in the 1st-2nd century AD: here, in the north-western corner of the block (Level I), a great house is composed by small squared rooms arranged around a wide rectangular courtyard of about 730 m², which is limited on its short sides by two opposite iwans (fig. 4).²² The façades of the four court iwans of the Parthian palace at Assur (fig. 5), decorated with three superimposed rows of engaged pseudo-Ionic columns, are however the best proof of the persistence of the Hellenistic style in the decoration.²³

Hellenistic influences seem to have been stronger in the architectural forms and decorations at Hatra, the main cultural centre of north-Mesopotamia in the Jazirah, along the route to Syria, which flourished particularly during the 2nd century AD.²⁴ Here, iwans are the main feature of monumental temples built in limestone, while other religious buildings display a wide repertory of Hellenistic features – pseudo-Ionic columns and pediments decorate for instance the façade of the temple of Maran – although one can speculate whether these could



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be rather referred to a renovated Graeco-Roman influence introduced from Syria.²⁵

As far as the artistic expression is concerned, one can only speculate on the impact of Greek art on the inhabitants of Asia, who were acquainted with the traditions of the art of the ancient Near East, which represented rigorously codified subjects and basically remained bidimensional; however, it seems reasonable to assume that the most striking feature of the innovative art introduced into Asia from Greece must have been its attitude to represent reality, through the fully naturalistic perception of the figures, and to investigate the relation existing between the figures and their space, through the artifice of perspective. This new perception must have been diffused by purely Hellenistic models, probably not of large scale, progressively penetrated into Asia at the end of the 4th century BC and spread everywhere along the routes of the Greek colonies, at least until the 1st century AD. Such is the case of a well known marble statue representing Aphrodite,²⁶ found at Europos-Dura and dated to the 2nd-1st century BC,²⁷ or the thousands of seal impressions, representing Greek gods or subjects, found in the archives building of Seleucia on the Tigris and dated to the 3rd-2nd century BC (fig. 6).²⁸

25 SCHLUMBERGER 1970 *Orient hellénisé*, 202-206; GAWLIKOWSKI & STARCKY 1985 *Palmyre*, 133, n. 64.

26 CUMONT 1926 *Doura-Europos*, 206-216, pls. 80-81; DOWNEY 1977 *Sculpture*, 44. Paris, Louvre (no. AO 20.126). The goddess wears a long draped tunic with a cloth and leans her left foot on a turtle; her pose, which is a pure Greek chiasmos, led some scholars to suppose that it was a figure inspired to a work of Phidias. Its fully Hellenistic conception leads rather to suppose that this statue was imported into Syria by a centre of Asia Minor (Antiochia?), but, since it was found in a temple dedicated to Artemis-Nanaia, it could have had a syncretistic meaning (PERKINS 1973 *Art*, 108-109).

27 MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 67.

28 BOLLATI, MESSINA & MOLLO 2004 *Sigillo, passim*. The majority of the clay sealings discovered by the Italian Expedition at Seleucia on the Tigris bear seal impressions representing Greek subjects, but there are also a number of Mesopotamian and Iranian figures and syncretistic subjects. These are preserved, for the most, in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad; however, a number of them is preserved in the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica (Palazzo Madama), Torino.

19 DOWNEY 1988 *Religious architecture*, 137-144.

20 With regard to the foundation of Seleucia on the Tigris and its importance in the context of Seleucid and Parthian Mesopotamia, see INVERNIZZI 1994 *Fondazione*, and INVERNIZZI 1992 *Centre*.

21 REUTHER 1926 *Innenstadt*, 147-150; HOPKINS 1972 *Topography*, 28-66; MESSINA 2006 *Archivi*, 71-136.

22 HOPKINS 1972 *Topography*, pl. IX.

23 ANDRAE & LENZEN 1933 *Assur*, fig. 15.

24 See ANDRAE 1908-1912 *Hatra*; INGHOIT 1954 *Parthian sculptures*; HOMES-FREDERICK 1963 *Sculptures parthes*; SAFAR & MUSTAFA 1974 *Hatra*; RICCIARDI VENCO 1996 *Wall paintings*; RICCIARDI VENCO 1996 *Domestic architecture*.

7. Nineveh, limestone statue of Hercules. London, British Museum (after MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 85).



7

The art of the Parthian period is, in the first instance, the evolution of this process, originated at the end of the 4th century BC: it is Hellenistic, because of its origin, following the encounter with Greek culture, and still remains Mesopotamian, Iranian or Central-Asian in connection with the different backgrounds of those regions: only after centuries it developed common traits that became characteristic, although its first imprint was never completely lost.

The wide repertory of Greek art inspired at first artists and artisans in different ways, allowing them to create works that satisfied the requirements of different classes, also outside the circle of the notables or the court. The universal figurative culture that continued evolving down to the 2nd century AD fascinated the common people dwelling in the regions fallen under the political control of the Parthians, and in Mesopotamia the interest of

the mid- and lower classes seems to have been particularly attracted by the wide production of small marble sculptures and terracotta figurines. On the one hand, these continued to reproduce purely Greek subjects, as the Lisippean model of the Hercules Epitrapezios from Nineveh shows.²⁹ This small limestone statue, dated to the 1st-2nd century AD, represents the hero resting on a seat covered with the leontè (fig. 7) and, on the base, two Greek inscriptions³⁰ report that it was dedicated by Sarapiodoros, son of Artemidoros, and sculpted by Diogenes.³¹

On the other hand, they served to express sentiments ripened throughout three thousand years of history, but now attaining a wider significance, for they perpetuate traditional subjects while renewing their aspects.

Nude female figures, some with their hands supporting the breasts, expressed the traditional local idea of fertility but seem also to have been influenced by the Greek Aphrodite (pl. 18.2),³² while sculptures of standing women in Greek dresses were made following ancient Mesopotamian techniques, as their inlaid eyes reveal. One of these statues, found at Borsippa, made in alabaster and dated to the 1st century BC-2nd century AD, is a good example of the mixture between Greek and Mesopotamian traditions (pl. 18.1):³³ this standing women, supporting her left breast with the right hand, wears a tunic in Greek style and her head is covered with a long cloth, which allows to compare the statue to the so-called group of the 'velato capite' figures, widely attested in the Hellenistic production of the Mediterranean area and also at Seleucia on the Tigris;³⁴ her pose recalls the Greek chiasmus and there is a reminiscence of naturalism in her anatomy. Nevertheless, the inlaid eyes and the 'V' shaped eyebrow are purely Mesopotamian and the figure wears also a long necklace with a pendant in the shape of a crescent, that permits the interpretation of the subject as a divine or semi-divine figure, or even a priestess, likely in connection with Nanaia.³⁵

29 MURRAY 1882 Herakles; INVERNIZZI 1989 Herakles Epitrapezios. London, British Museum (no. 1881-0701-01).

30 ΣΑΡΑΠΙΟΔΩΡΟΣ ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΩΡΟΥ ΚΑΤΕΥΧΗΝ and ΔΙΟΓΕΝΗΣ ΕΠΟΙΕΙ.

31 MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 85.

32 One of these terracotta figurines, now preserved in the British Museum (no. 92215), comes from Babylon and can be dated to the 2nd century BC-2nd century AD (VAN BUREN 1930 *Figurines*, 35, no. 177; KARVONEN-KANNAS 1995 *Figurines*, 119, no. 1, pl. 2). It is characterized by its prosperous anatomy, which recalls prototypes diffused in Mesopotamia since the Prehistoric period, and by the naturalistic modelling of the face, which seems rather influenced by Hellenistic types (MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 69).

33 RASSAM 1898 Door lintel; READE 1986 Rassam, 112, 115-116, pl. 18. London, British Museum (no. 612/91593). MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 68.

34 INVERNIZZI 1973-1974 Figure panneggiata; MENEGAZZI 2005 Figure femminili.

35 Nanaia, the daughter of the moon-god Sin, became a popular goddess during the

8. Seleucia on the Tigris, bronze statue of Hercules. Baghdad, Iraq Museum (after *La terra tra i due fiumi* 1985, no. 231).

In a common context of syncretism, Athena is at the same time Nana/Nanaia or Allat, Apollon is Mithra, and Hercules is Veretraghna, as attested by the Parthian inscription engraved, in the 2nd century AD, on the legs of a 2nd century BC bronze statue found at Seleucia on the Tigris (fig. 8). This statue depicts the hero standing and leaning against his club (which is now missing), following a well known Lisippean prototype: the so-called 'Farnese Hercules'. The inscription, which is bilingual in Greek and Parthian, reports that it was dedicated in AD 150-151 by the king Vologases in a temple of Seleucia, after having been deported there from the region of Mesene.³⁶ Nevertheless, according to some scholars,³⁷ it seems reasonable to assume that the statue, which is a remarkable example of the Hellenistic production, was actually cast at Seleucia during the 2nd century BC and transported in Mesene at a given moment. Together with other examples this statue seems to show that the Hellenistic tradition lasted for centuries not only in the cities founded by the Seleucids, being melted with the Mesopotamian tradition continuously during the Parthian period.

However, when considering several finds of the late 1st century BC or after, the Hellenistic influence seems to be limited to the surface. Glazed capitals with Hellenistic reminiscences lose their original structural function becoming mere wall decorations, and, progressively, the traditional codified significance of some figures, which never disappeared, seems to regain its importance over the form: if sometimes a certain naturalism is still shown by the anatomy of the figures, their original relation with the surrounding space is lost and the frontal view is preferred to other possibilities, such as perspective.

The majority of these figures, representing nude standing women, are made in terracotta, even if some specimen are also made in precious stone: terracotta figurines have been found in all major Mesopotamian centres and widely discovered at Seleucia on the Tigris³⁸ and Susa,³⁹ while a well known small sculpture in alabaster, with ruby inlaid eyes and navel, and bronze gilded crescent, necklace and earrings, comes from a grave in the area



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of Babylon (pl. 17.2):⁴⁰ it depicts a woman rising her left hand, with the purpose of holding an object – now missing –, who can be connected in someway with the Mesopotamian goddess Nanaia, and maybe considered as an acolyte, because of the crescent over her forehead.

The Mesopotamian background seems to re-emerge through the attitude of these figures, conveying a purely conceptual meaning: whether they are interpreted as goddesses or purely human beings, these standing women refer, in general terms, to fertility because they are naked or because they hold their breasts. The code is clear and there is no urgent need to represent reality or render the natural interaction of the figures with the

Parthian period, from Mesopotamia to Central Asia, and the crescent is her most common attribute.

³⁶ *La terra tra i due fiumi* 1985, 420-422, no. 231. Baghdad, Iraq Museum (no. IM 100178). For further readings of the Parthian inscription, see also INVERNIZZI 1989 Héraclès, 65-66, n. 2, and selected bibliography.

³⁷ INVERNIZZI 1989 Héraclès, 98-111.

³⁸ INVERNIZZI 1968-1969 Coroplastica.

³⁹ MARTINEZ SÈVE 2002 *Figurines*.

⁴⁰ This small sculpture has been found in a hypogeum of Hilla (grave 4) and is dated to the end of 1st century BC-1st century AD (INVERNIZZI 2008 *Dominations*, 252, no. 250). Paris, Musée du Louvre (no. AO 20127).

9. Seleucia on the Tigris, terracotta figurine representing Eros and Psyche. Ann Arbor, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (after MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 152).



9

10. Babylon, terracotta figurine representing a couple. London, British Museum (after MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 153).



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surrounding space: the form is totally subordinated to the content and the distance from early Hellenistic works is clear where the same general subject is reproduced. Such is the case of two terracotta figurines coming from Seleucia on the Tigris and Babylon. While the figurine from Seleucia, representing Eros and Psyche and dated to the 2nd-1st century BC, reveals a clear naturalistic perception of the figures (fig. 9),⁴¹ the figurine from Babylon, representing the same subject and probably datable to the 1st-2nd century AD, is a schematic elaboration of the same prototype, where the interest for a realistic representation is much less evident (fig. 10).⁴²

In this respect the frontality of the full Parthian period can be considered conventional, as was the profile in the works preceding the encounter with Greek art, for it led to a revaluation of the figure as an abstract image: these images appear to us solemn and hieratic, because they are essential.

The process originating this kind of expression, especially concentrating on the meaning of the representation rather than on its form, apparently developed in parallel with works still revealing the Hellenistic influence, but is still unclear, as is its evolution. This is due to the incompleteness of the information acquired and the fluctuating chronological range of many findings: Hellenistic prototypes could have been in use for centuries, even when their innovative impulse was partially lost or re-elaborated, and could have been replicated far after their primitive diffusion. On the other hand, the diffusion of images rather abstract more than real and the contemporary existence of works still influenced in some way by the early Hellenistic production are not incompatible in such a complex society. They may well have coexisted, at least for some time.

If the evolution of this process is not yet totally clear, we know, however, its extreme consequences.

In the 2nd century AD, at the end of the Parthian period, the extraordinary sculptures discovered at Hatra, that are the expression of a class of rich traders and notables and belong to the widest corpus of Parthian stone sculptures known so far, show a clear choice for a rigid frontality,

41 VAN INGEN 1939 *Figurines*, 223, no. 843; MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 152. Ann Arbor, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (no. 15280).

42 VAN BUREN 1930 *Figurines*, 224, no. 1099; KARVONEN-KANNAS 1995 *Figurines*, 150, no. 255, pl. 45; MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 153. London, British Museum (no. 91789).

11. Hatra, limestone statue of king Sanatruq. Baghdad, Iraq Museum (after MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, 79, fig. 7).

although Hellenistic reminiscences are still evident in some works.⁴³

The statues of the gods are solemn in their static pose and their stare creates a supernatural distance between them and the worshippers. The latter are the nobles of Hatra, depicted in many statues dedicated in the temple of Shamash and the smaller sanctuaries of the city. They show their devotion rising their right hand, and their status is revealed by their rich dresses: good examples are kings Uthal, Sanatruq (fig. 11) and Vologases, or Shapry, the daughter of Sanatruq.

The frontal view is their more evident characteristic and, as a matter of fact, frontality becomes in this period a distinguishing feature of the art produced in several regions of the Parthian empire, from Syria to Elymais, at the same time as other iconographical patterns. Both gods and humans wear a characteristic dress, consisting of a long tunic and baggy trousers, with curved folds, sometimes decorated with elaborate embroidery and attached jewels or metal adornments. A torque, or heavy necklace is also frequent. Typical male hairdos are either bouffant or arranged in three masses of hair. The most common female dress is a floor length dress, often decorated with rich jewels, such as necklaces, bracelets and earrings. These analogies are clear to the extent that, according to many scholars, these common traits permit the characterization of this artistic production as purely Parthian.⁴⁴ Common traits are certainly evident in this late production, although it seems reasonable to raise the question why these traits apparently developed only at the very end of the Parthian period, when one might least expect them.

This is however an arbitrary question, considering our limited knowledge of the evolution of certain representations.

The process of continuous interrelation between different backgrounds that clearly emerges from the archaeological evidence, leads rather to rise different and opposite questions on the same line of Michael Rostovtzeff⁴⁵ and Daniel Schlumberger:⁴⁶ should the rigid frontality of the art of the late Parthian period be considered, on the figurative level, as a reaction to the naturalistic perception of the figure? Or should it be considered as one of the possible poses derived from the wide Greek repertory,



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and – for this reason – the extreme figurative legacy of the Hellenistic art?

As an alternative, could frontality be better understood in the context of a conceptual continuity with the art developed in ancient Mesopotamia, and come in direct contact with Greek art? Could it be considered as the evolution of a process re-evaluating and re-codifying the intrinsic meaning of the represented subjects?

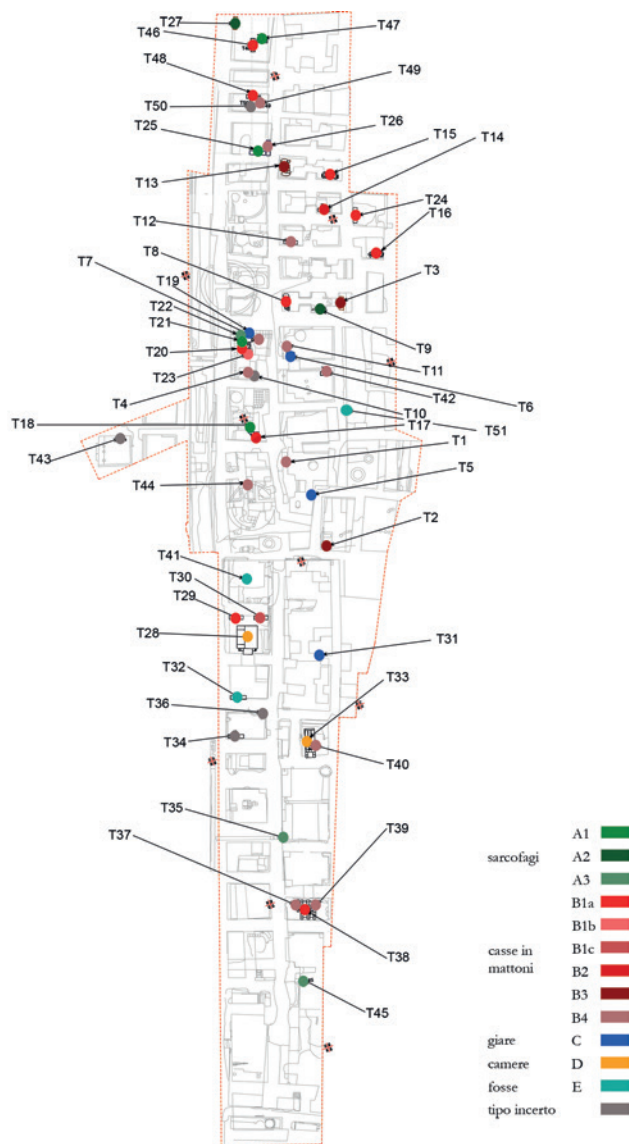
It is impossible to answer clearly and provide definite reconstructions at present, but, since the evidence we have – and hope to see increased in the future – clearly reveals contaminations in the artistic expression that were originated by a manifold culture, the main question appears to be: should it be possible to go back?

⁴³ With regard to the sculptures of Hatra see INGHOLT 1954 *Parthian sculptures*, and HOMES-FREDERICK 1963 *Sculptures parthes*.

⁴⁴ See ROSTOVITZ 1935 *Parthian art*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ SCHLUMBERGER 1970 *Orient hellénisé*, 196–201.



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1. Seleucia on the Tigris, area of the city-archives. Distribution of graves under the floor of the houses of the Parthian period (after MESSINA 2006 *Archivi*, 187, tav. XII).

2. Hilla, alabaster statue of nude woman. Paris, musée du Louvre (Courtesy of musée du Louvre, © RMN/P Bernard).



2

1. Borsippa, alabaster statue of draped woman. London, British Museum (after MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 68).



1

2. Babylon, Terracotta figurine of nude woman. London, British Museum (after MESSINA 2007 *Alessandro*, no. 69).



2